

Travel Notes: Yemen

November - December 2009

5 December, Sana'a. Coming out of the hotel I am passing for the last time alongside the military barrier in the labyrinth of narrow streets at the market around Midan At-Tahrir. In a few minutes I am at the small square in front of the Posts where under the dim light of bulbs dozens of tables savor of the well known fassulya, ful and fresh Yemen bread. I sit down besides a man with henna painted beard and almost same instant shows a waiter. "Wahid kibda, hubs u shai halib" (liver of sheep, bread and tea with milk) will be the menu for the night, and in a few moments I discard of the nylon table cover and plastic cup given to foreigners. Instead a fill up with water a metal mug (one per table) and take a few mouthfuls. I reach for the cup of tea from the passing by try follow how the steaming kibda comes out of the gas ring in a skillet with a long handgrip. I break off the bread. The henna painted beard signals – is the mug free? – I nod and he takes a thirsty gulp. I sink my fingers into the chopped meat and with the same hand leave my greasy fingertips on the mug. I remember how different seemed Sana'a a month ago – the bread still not broken and a drink never shared with the locals.

I went of to Yemen expecting something like Colombia and Pakistan. A trip, which despite all the beauty of the surroundings, will be burdened with slight and constant uncertainties. Where am I? Who is in control of this region and what kind of people will meet me after the next traffic control point? Many questions without answers... It soon came to clear that in Yemen at least the criminal element in the European or American sense, is missing. This was strange at the beginning, considering all the men with curved knives (jambiya) hanging on their wastes and a couple of automatic guns at home. But... I got used to this and in time stopped watching constantly over my backpack – I have rarely felt such a safety that nothing will be touched in my luggage or pockets. After few attempts I found the tourist police. They said it's impossible to let me go in the Hadramaut desert, but I got permits for some less dangerous regions. „Tasriih" (travel permits) are required for foreigners when traveling by land around the country. At each traffic control point 50-60 km apart, you leave one copy of the document (I had 30 copies), and the military check who you are, who's driving you, where are you going and this is how they localize you. The reason being a few conflicts. In Sa'ada (at the border with Saudi Arabia) war between Shias and Sunnis reaches its climax, Marib and Shabwa provinces are close to the point of self-ruling, and dealing with the legal regime using hostages. Years ago the kidnapped were hardly terrorized with anything but numerous cups of tea and the hospitality of the kidnappers, but in time the game grew harsh and now there are casualties. For my own reassurance I went looking for the statistics and found out that 100% of the hostages were on a group tour with a local driver, guide and even guards – to think about, who's going to waste time for one person? – but soon after they kidnapped ONE Japanese and this curbed my enthusiasm. Anyway – in time most of the uncertainties clear out and the trip became calm and nonchalant. West part of the country is hardly riskier than any Balkan country.

With two exceptions (Quito and Istanbul), I accept the capitals of the world as unavoidable transit points, where you land, take of and take care of travel arrangements and other mundane banalities before you continue your journey. Sana'a is the third exception, and this is due entirely to the old city. Well – the wall and the gates are renovated to look suitable for the tourists, but the houses in ocher decorated with white lace ornaments rise 7-8 stories among minarets in the same style. I am not fond of the tall building, but Yemen "skyscrapers" are from period preceding the concept „price per square meter", when nameless masters build in way that the swarm of people to defend as little territory as possible. It is surprising to see on a top a hill a village of 5

houses, each one 5 stories high, but if for Englishmen the house is a castle, then for the Yemenis the house is mostly a fortress. Naturally, great deal of the interior is occupied by a staircase, which is often in a miniature scale... but this is not a problem if you live without furniture like bed, 3 door closet and piano for the kid. Inside is labyrinths of rooms, half-floors and alcoves, windows are often multicolored and irregularly shaped. Blue, orange, green and red reflections adorn the walls and stone floors when sun is shining through, and the pipes and installation is running on the forefront of the house. Above the refrigerator-style windows suspended on hooks are pots with more pretentious content, and the room for gathering (mafradj) with Spartan pillows, rugs and Islam symbols on the wall, goes well with the view that is typical for the top floor of every building. I spent 2 days in a hotel twice more expensive than it's usual for the capital, only to get the chance to see the houses from inside. At this time there were no more tourists and I usually slept alone in a hotel with all the rooms unlocked. There is no country in the region with greater love for details (the word ornate comes in mind) – it's like Yemen preserved something all the rest of the Arab world have let go.

It was time to go to the province and I narrowed my aim on a few villages 50 km from the capital. There was only one Traffic Control Point, the road in a very good condition and I got relatively quickly to Tila – in the foot of a characteristic cliff whose top despite the vertical sandstones was girded with escarpment. I found the son of the imam who opened the door of the fortress, and since he didn't have change for the entrance fee I kept the keys as guaranty that I will get my money. We agreed to meet in 3 hours at the same place and I started towards the top. Said hello to "Atanas BG" signed on a cactus leaf and climbed for 20 mins to a landing with several towers and run-down walls. The only standing buildings was the mosque and next to it were 3-4 tanks with shallow green water gathered from rains. Once upon a time it was raining more and the water supply was enough for the 300-400 soldiers, who didn't let the Turkish pass at any period of their forays on the Arab peninsula. Most of these fortresses became obsolete when the bombers came. A view reveals in all directions yellow terraced hills, enforced with masonry for decades, which unlike the Indonesian looked dusty, dry and dead. But the wet season – locals say – paints the terraces in green and the landscape turns into garden.

The surrounding mountains are close to 3000 m high, but the terrain is a plateau Ethiopian style and not very interesting, so I left the mountaineering for somewhere else. I started through the terraces, peasants gave me directions, and then I made photos of some blue lizards. On the side of the footpath one could see stone towers and dozens of buildings where the locals keep their harvest during the wet season. In less than 2 hours I was in Hababa. Its tall buildings could be seen from far away and the village came into view with its authentic narrow streets where no garbage truck or autos could go. Streets are not swept at all and dozens plumbing pipes lay directly on the pavement, even the stairs to the city were piled up with plastic bags, bottles and other rotting stuff. It's amazing how modern garbage from polythene looks authentic, but still unlike India, Yemen is not a country that encourages the rubbish-heaping tourism. I looked into the main attraction in Hababa – photogenic green scum in a reservoir reflecting the old mosque and village skyline. Then going around the medina I came across children that were beating their camels. At last I motioned to the first car in sight and got a ride few kilometers to the turnout with Shibam. Leaving Tila I thought there won't be another Traffic Control Point on the way, but just in case I brought out ONE permit from the pack. One kilometer before the city I saw a barrier and left the copy to a couple bored military men with the clear notion that I will have to round them on the way back. This is acceptable way of travel in the save provinces, but to play Indiana Jones in Marib and Shabwa is just plain stupid. Little before noon I caught the end of the Friday market which inevitably closed with ezan for the most important pray of the week, but I won't go into details since it wasn't as impressive as the Friday market in Bayt al-Faqih. Took me an hour to climb 300-400 meters above the village to get to the fortress Kaukaban, where I could check

the surrounding area and come up with an idea how to avoid the military men. Lonely cliffs stood around, their steepest sides reinforced with masonry, and through the fields down I could see the path going to Tila. I remembered some landmarks on the way and they led me back reaching very close to Hababa. Pipes along the way made evident the locals had big problems with the water supply. 20 years ago the president has been born from Tila. He dug excessively in his native town but didn't find a drop till 800 meters deep. Today 300 meter well in Shibam is supplying with pumps higher located Kaukaban, Hababa and Tila. This way these villages are paying four times what Shibamians pay, and the price is the same if water comes from pumps or cisterns. In fact drinking water plays second fiddle – more important is to water the qat trees since the end of the qat will be the beginning of the real tragedy. This mild drug, which I first encounter in Ethiopia, is very common in Yemen. Close to 95% of men are wasting their time, money and health to sit all day long with they chick bulging. Yemenis explain with disdain that 'Ethiopians spit out the qat, while we tuck in the herb in our mouth for hours (like hamsters), where its true power unleashes'. This is understandable since in Ethiopia alcohol and prostitutes add to the list of vices.

Got to Manakhah after waiting for half a day to fill in with passengers a direct taxi going there. People came, sat down in the Peugeot for an hour or so and then idly went off, and next to us cars going to Al Hudaydah were going every 20 mins. I had to pay the full fare to Hudaydah (twice as much) and barely made it in late afternoon 5 km to Manakhah – in the foot of a steep hill. It turned out hitchhiking in Yemen is not so difficult – later on I even got to ride with people not interested in money. The road from Sana'a to the Red Sea goes by country's highest point – Jabal an Nabi Shuayb (3,666 m) – but the plateau around looks characterless. Just shy before Manakhah the flat rock face jagged and mighty crags rise from south. Then going down to Red Sea vehicles enter into a gorge which gradually fills up with water. In the narrowest part of the canyon under vertical rocks above the asphalt 100 m a part are planted wheelchairs for beggars who seem resistant to accidents and rock-fall. Same as in Africa, places with traffic detours, construction workers, or bumps are filled immediately with peddlers, hungry bums, kids selling tissues and aimless onlookers – where traffic is slowing down sales are going up.

I woke up rested and had an early start to the mountains above Manakhah. In Yemen the daylight starts at 5:30 and sunset is 12 hours later, so I quickly adjusted my rhythm to the circumstances. No matter how tired I was the day before still managed to find time and energy to find the beginning of the trail leading to a steep crevice above the village. Thus skipping the wandering in the morning. „Where are you going? Where is your guide? You don't know the way.” – said an early riser, but I didn't answer back. Is it really only one way? Do we really need a road to go somewhere? Aren't there thousands of paths and we just step from one to another? If I do I get lost at the beginning or at the end of the route – when I have to get out of a village into the mountain, or I am coming tired back. This is due to the inertia of changing civilization with the wild. Once you get on the hill each step opens new possibilities, views and feelings independent of time, altitude and direction. Walking without a goal is impossible – on every cross path we come up with short-lived decisions and micro targets – and yet the emotion is deeper if the journey claims its own objectives and stays free of our limiting ideas about the final result, time and destination. I was entertaining similar thoughts while climbing the crevice. Several times I scrambled the rocks, but saw mule prints on the path and said to myself that mules don't scramble. I went round and a side, but then another time I thought – it's full of lizards, and they most probably go straight up... this way I reached the plateau. Continued through the terraces, and then I saw veiled and silent granny. Close by were the steps going high up, couldn't miss them. In a minute, on top of the hill showed escarpment and massive wooden gate. It was by chance I happened to be at the place the owner of the hotel was telling me about – Kahil village. Very few residents. Because with the bombers came along the so called Mr. Lifestyle, making

obsolete strongholds, remote villages, and solitary style of living. However, I'm right there and feeling truly happy - one goes through thousands of stages, build houses, sleep in beds, drives cars, works on computers, but always gets back where he started. And goes back in the cave, this time with a sleeping bag, pad and primus. Then back to the mountain as an outcast, this time geared with crampons, ice axe and a rope. Could be an instinctive nostalgia for what's lost, or a triumph of the survival of the will over the circumstances. Maybe we pay respects to the harsh conditions of our father's home from long time ago - not sure, but going back to primal and wandering are inseparable part of any real journey. Going opposite to the evolution is an inevitable part of the evolution itself. At the end of day this is the map of the area I produced (see). For the record the terrain is not higher than 2900 m. Peaks are almost everywhere invaded by the military, surrounded by walls and cluttered with antennas. Arab music comes out of the trailers. Before getting to the top the military will find and stop you. They will inquire if you are crazy, what you're looking for, review your photos of cacti, lizards and fortresses, then they will ask for a cigarette. Rocks at places are with alpine character, to get to a higher planted terrace one may consider a safety rope. Still the better views remain lower, where medieval villages like microscopic islands of civilization - prototypes of Manhattan, rise on the vertical, primal rocks. Other targets for purposeful wanderings in the area are mountains Rayma and Bura - much to the west of Manakhah. I heard only superlatives about them from local mountaineers which I met later on.

Hudaydah is more African than a Yemeni city. The architecture and its endless boulevards, as well the not typical for the country homeless lying around on cardboards make the first impression that stays. The Promenade along the Red Sea is crowded with these same bums, wrapped in rags and using the tide in the rocks for primary needs like bath and toilet. Temperatures are brutal, but more problematic are the humidity and burning wind which seem to come straight from the depths of the African desert. Most likely I wouldn't have mentioned Hudeyda if it wasn't for the huge fish market which I encountered after a short walk in direction of the pier. I have seen such things in ports like Aden or Mocha. Most of the immigrants in Yemen coming illegally from Somalia or Eritrea together with the smugglers from Djibouti, land with these precise small (painted with red, yellow, black and green stripes) boats called sambuk. Bona fide boatmen use them as intended - for fishing around the coast, as they were not made to cross the sea - but often wonders come true due to lack of money, not because of investments. Several dikes of rocks and sand are guarding the port from the waves, and its calm waters, along a dozen shabby gangways anchored boats were hardly moving. Planks are rotten, primitively nailed or tied with wires. Some are entirely missing, but this does not prevent people with carts, crates of fish and ice blocks to hop and crawl, and pass each other like ants. Cats are lazy - same as seabirds soaring in the sky. Old men sit in the stern, untangle, sort and wrap their fish nets, the plastic buoys and powerful engines reflect the colors of the sunset - bright brown and caramel. Tired porters lay in the sand and the silhouettes of heavy bodies and fluttering turbans are printed over the yellow light on the horizon. Another day goes by, lips and eyes praising Allah. The prayer "Salat Al-Maghreb" starts immediately after sunset, to avoid any associations with a bow to the sun.

I may never clear to myself the following phenomenon - in rebel areas live mainly peaceful individuals. In conflict countries such as Sudan, Colombia, Pakistan and Yemen, one comes across a strangely true and noble people. As if the lack of mercantilism, greed and hypocrisy are stipulations for war, cataclysm and misery. I have already described my encounters in the cataracts of Nile and the hunza hospitality in Karakorum, and about that natural respect to the stranger in more uncertain areas of the Andes. Arabs in Yemen proved to be in a similar way sincere and unobtrusive, at the same time prone to make you a favour if you make a simple contact and ask for anything. The contrast between the aggressive neighboring Ethiopia and

gracious nature (very close to tenderness) of Yemenis is surprising, especially given that except for the religion, these two nations (talking about the Semites in Ethiopia) are historically related and proximate in all other ways. Even one of the local psychos fascinates me with kindness and hospitality - will mention him later again. Conflicts in the country are too widely ranged not to write a few words. As in many other societies, the strongest bond in Yemen is with the tribe. Elders decide the future of their clan and they enter into alliances with other elders. This is the reason that people have a strict Sunni or Shia identity, even though it remains slightly in the background. As a result - rebels in Saad province who are Shiites (recognizing up to the 5th imam) are funded by Iran in the war against Saudi Arabia and Yemen, whose president Ali Abdullah Saleh is also a Shiite. It goes as far that many locals hate Iran more than Israel, which is not strange - many in Iran do respect Hussein more than Mohammed - religious tolerance from all around ... Until 50 years ago the imam ahead of feudal Yemen had sufficient number of supporters, but after the take-over in 1962 the military emerged as new player in local politics. Considering the role Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia, and British colonial past in Aden played, even more the Soviet interests in People's Democratic Republic of Yemen which produced strong socialist party with several factions, conflicts in Yemen look as kaleidoscope overshadowing many other conflicts around the world. Perhaps Mother Teresa is the only one not sticking her nose in Yemeni politics, but she has long been dead, and today another ridiculous colonist and top-notch policeman grind their teeth for this bitter pie. It is only logical that the most inferior position in the hierarchy remains the state. Most of the Yemenis think after Ali Abdullah Saleh there will be a civil war since he is the one sustaining the fragile balance in the country. Saleh is the man who knows when to be good, evil, nasty and uncompromising with the dozens of tribes, elders, islamists, communists and generals, and he is almost seventy.

At times I wished I haven't had visited and described so many markets. It is like I want to erase the beautiful old memories... time kills the freshness and the euphoria of the sight gives way to categorization and comparison with something familiar. Still Friday market in Bayt al Faqih remains the most colorful venue in Yemen situated in a large area in otherwise unrepresentable village. I got 50 km away from the place with a car that stopped on the first lift of my hand, and the road further was hardly manageable. Junkers were piled up with bags and grapes of people, goat heads were protruding from the trunks, cows were riding in trucks - every living creature was heading to the epicenter of the event. At some point the car couldn't go any further and we had to continue by foot - together with peasants pulling strings of sheep, threading between fruit sellers and cooks with huge pans. Crowds of people were seated on beds, mats and rugs and it took me another 20 minutes to get to the market. The most interesting part is the flat field, herded with donkeys and buffaloes. Somewhere around the goats, pigeons and chicken are tied up camels, and next to them in groups are gathered turbans and henna beards in their simple white working clothes. Money flip through their fingers since one ritual is to put in seller's hands $\frac{3}{4}$ of the price asked but even the poorest sellers resist the temptation and the bargain continues. Around them are scattered baskets, woven ropes, panniers, tin cans and barrels. Pied chicklings cuddle in boxes and warm kids' hugs, small melons lie around, candied dates stuck to the scales of chubby old men, and next to the barber "doctors" poke patients heads with glass horns and draw blood as a panacea for unknown illnesses. Most of the peasants are trading grain, flour and vegetables, as well as long, fresh bundles with the nations' favorite drug qat. Children play with strung monkeys, curious newcomers want to be photographed and asked if I work for the TV, and then quack throws pebbles in front of my flip-flops and began to foretell of Arabic letters on them - "Aleph. Lam. Mim. Road awaits you! "After four hours at the market, this is somehow clear...

I am going to quoting by memory Borges short story "The Aleph". First letter of the Arab and Hebrew alphabets is also a symbol of the infinite universe. Behind a staircase going down to a

dark basement, Borges found a small, shiny sphere. It contained all the sights, all light and darkness, seen from every angle. Stars and planets, London streets, Bengali markets, sunsets, Babylon library, tigers and roses, the face of beloved Beatrice and the empty, lonely room of the author. The Earth was reflecting in the aleph and the aleph was part of the reflected Earth. Seeing this with awe and pain, Borges cites Shakespeare - „I could be bounded in a nut-shell and count myself a king of infinite space...” I was having similar feeling for Yemen. The landscapes sometimes reminded me of Tafraout, Morocco or Nigerian Zinder; another time smells were bringing me back to India... but they were coming out of the colonial London facades in Aden, which in 5 minutes looked very much like Malaysian Penang. Tall cliffs over the Arab sea were twins of the Chilean Valparaiso, in the low was sticking out the small “Big Ben” in a neighborhood and prospects as if built by Russians. After the 2000 bombing few vessels call at the port, nevertheless in Aden industrial areas and suburbs, shopping malls and amusement parks continue to rise up. There is hardly more liberated Yemeni town in contrast with the austere manners of the north, the sight of a bare female face here is something normal. Distinctive smell of salt and fish surrounds fortress Syrah where the water tanks built 1000 years are constructed in a way that bewildered the British colonials. Their many attempts to revive the system and canals were a complete failure. I am chatting with a limping refrigeration-naval engineer who has no job in the last years. – See what we have built centuries ago! Now we chew qat ... he says and stuffs some leaves in his cheek. Only among the wealthier classes rarely there are people that haven't touched drugs - the rest are reliving the drunkenness of a nation.

Due to lack of a sea transportation I had to fly to Socotra. Here's where the tourists were. Similar to the bus the aircraft from Sana'a stops in Aden and Mukala before elapsing the last 500 km above the Arabian Sea and land on the island. Most of the groups come directly from the capital without ever seeing the country, which is somewhat understandable since Socotra is the most peaceful part of Yemen. On the coastal line can be seen dozens of rusting Russian tanks with barrels aimed at the sea, and there are military bases in proximity to inspire respect in pirates. Other kind of pirates have fixed prices for vans at the airport ten times higher, it is enough to walk only a kilometer among the main road to find many scurried minibuses not mentioned in the guidebooks. I stationed in the capital - Hadibo - with the only 3-4 hotels on the island. The south revealed limestone massif 1500 m high very good to wander, so for the next few hours I found the beginning of the trail to be ready for the next day. In Hadibo there is market and shops of course, but anticipating salty prices I stocked everything except water from Aden. The only unknown remained what would I drink after the first day and how aggressive will the mosquitoes be. Without knowing I had broken the filter arriving in Sana'a and I thought of using iodine for water treatment, but it turned out that lakes and streams are almost sterile. The next day I was up at 5 and took the road at dark. Only an hour later I was at the foot of the mountains.

Socotra is a remarkable place in a global sense, had broken away from the continents millions of years ago. Flora and animals of the island are mostly endemic and besides the dozens of mountains and climbing walls, nature abounds in caves, beaches, coral reefs, canyons and the rivers, lakes and oasis-like corners. The main ridge and several other massifs cut in the territory north-south, and now there is a ring asphalt road for jeeps and tourists short of time. For three hours I reached about 1000 meters above sea level without meeting people. The most common animal is the goat - emerging and curious to meet the newcomers. I had map of the area, but the path was clear so I didn't need to pull out the compass. Only in the afternoon met a boy carrying a goatling on his back going back to Hadibo. From him I learned that in three days is the Islamic holiday Aid al-Adha - proved to be valuable information. We talked as much as it was possible and after we parted I went to look for a shelter. I had a sleeping bag and some solid fuel tablets, so I was happy to find a herdsman refuge made of stone with large overhang. There was no

wind and the tea boiled easy, around 6 in the evening I wrapped in the sleeping bag mainly to keep away the insects. Shortly after I filled the bottles with water, a goat showed up, told a story in a strange tongue and then marked the puddle where I filled the bottles from. Another goat considered the inventory at the shelters for a dinner, but I drove them all off and fell quickly asleep around 8. On the next morning the path deteriorated and gradually disappeared, but I had a feeling for the terrain and started in the direction of a dry gully. The trees "dragon blood" are the symbol of the island, with branches interlaced like fingers and ramified like a mushroom cap. All slopes are covered with them, at one point showed the desert rose, called very suitably "bottle tree". The base collecting water and moisture is much wider than the stem, and I could see pale red flowering fragile buds. I was quite amazed when cucumbers as a tree specimen appeared, otherwise there are no wild mammals on the island and the animal diversity comes mainly from insects, reptiles and birds. At noon I stopped and rested in the first village - Darhu, but walking in the afternoon heat was unbearable, so by that time I was already looking for a camp. I was looking for palms as a sure sign for water and found a place in Dirhor canyon. Although the bottom is narrow and the walls around - almost vertical, I encamped so that there is no danger of flood and stonefall. Next thing was a long bath and swimming in the deep ponds. Crabs ran away, and with the exception of one silver lizard no other company showed up. Considering the route for the next day I gradually faced a small dilemma. I had about six hours remaining to fully cross the island. This was no problem by itself but these six hours were in the gorge of the river which in places was only 2-3 m wide. Part of it would require swimming with wet backpack, but this was not the main problem yet. What happens if it starts raining? There is no escape form a flash flood. I could only hope to climb 4-5 meters above the bottom, where I could wait for the rain to stop - for few hours... perched on a tree? ... will there be falling stones? ... how often does it rain in November? I left the answers for the morning and the rain woke me up before 4 am. It rained a little then stopped but the skies didn't clear, and suddenly I remembered that tomorrow is Aid al-Adha and showing up at this precise moment on the scarcely populated south coast of the island I could be stranded there for a long time. It had happened twice to me to wait for days for transportation just around that date, so I decided I be gone from the gorge and head back to Hadibo. I moved quickly to the upper parts of the narrow and two hours after I was on the road. After another two hours the first jeep stopped and little later I arrived in the city. It rain throughout the whole afternoon so that even the streets were flooded, and I don't want to even think what was happening in the canyon.

At the peak of Kurban Bayram I had another idea. I wanted to go 70 km to the west and there was really no local transport, but if I could somehow get to the airport, I had a real chance catch the morning flight with tourists - straight to Kalansiya. The idea worked, and after several hours I was in the company of the Italian consul in Algeria. At noon lagoon Tatva showed up among beads of dunes, emerald waters, light curly clouds and miles of beaches with sand fine as flour. Crabs were digging holes dumping sand in pointy towers, many seagulls were arranged a meter away from each other to fairly distribute the fish among them. The water was warm and shallow for hundreds of meters and while swimming I spotted several sandy colored manta rays. I dried out, left my luggage at camping, walked to the nearest rocky, steep peak over the lagoon, watched the sunset and spent the evening in the company of mountaineers from Sana'a. I gave them my maps of Socotra and they showed the following acrobatic tricks. 60-year-old man put on a biscuit on top of a cap of mineral water bottle. Stood before it on his left leg, grabbed his right leg with his left hand and his left ear - with his right hand. Then he knee bended down on one leg and bit cookie. But that was nothing - the most flexible man knee bended down on one leg and put the other leg like in a Turkish position on his thigh. Then he got up and squatted like that (without hands) several times. Other mountaineer hand was stepped on sea urchin. I asked him - you want iodine?, But he said - I will disinfect with fire! Wow that's a miracle, I thought - sure that local know best, but after he brutally burned his leg and couldn't step on it anymore, I

got needle and tweezers, and into the light of a headlamp start digging into his black toes. After half an hour we start pulling the urchin needles, then we ate Arabic style - for about 5 minutes we finished the rice and tins and chocolate and everything. Had some tea. A few days ago I received an email from them - along with the greetings and Arab courtesies, one of them wants to see me next week at his villa in Taiz, and the other one found me a job as a teacher in that same village Kalansiya. For whole three months - although hardly for anyone else other than the locals, time spent on the island could be sufficient.

Arriving back in Aden there was a minor problem. My permit would expire in two days and had to renew it to go back to the capital. This was relatively easy in Sana'a, but there were no tourists in Aden and the matter was more complicated. I headed to the port where I remembered seeing a policeman a week ago, and a doorman chewing qat stopped me at the gate. After half hour and call to Sana'a, the policemen decided to send me to see General Osama. The general also cleaned his hands by sending me at the Ministry of Tourism, and there in a room full of construction debris I found sleeping and woke up Abdul Nasser. 10 minutes passed and he invited me in another room with a fax machine. I explained to him about the permit, but instead sending a decree to Sana'a, he only said that we will fix things ... but we shouldn't hurry. After another half hour Abdul Nasser dressed in his parade uniform, and we got into a minibus going somewhere. Along the way every other man greeted him, and depending on his mood, he nodded or snapped a reply, or just ignored his acquaintances. Let's stop and drink tea - Abdul Nasser was far from asking, and after another hour we had drinks, food and talked with another 10-20 people. The cop was following his moods - first he gave just like that 200 rials to a little girl in the van, then scoffed at a driver, didn't pay another taxi driver, but they all treated him with respect, as if he holds their fate in his hands. We came to a building with a sign "Aden Security", and stayed for 20 minutes. We have to go to the Immigration - said Abdul Nasser and once again we crossed the city. In the Immigration we sat down for long time, drank tea and talked with other officials that were chewing qat. In time it became clear that none of the institutions of Aden feels responsible for me, especially since the permit expires the next day. And then Abdul Nasser made Solomon decision - "Tomorrow I will see you off to make sure you leave the city, and my colleagues from Ibb you'll issue a new license. Let's now go to the market and eat something!" We were holding hands at the market. After yet another scandal - only got the words "akhl mafi" (no brain) - Nasser bought qat and after one more theatrical act in the restaurant he left me at the hotel. He gave me his number to call him in the morning to meet me at the bus station. I got the impression that the policeman is downright psychopath with sufficient authority, that does not comply with anyone, but at the same time he behaved too friendly with me. He refused emphatically that I paid anything that day, when he spent probably 1/10 of his salary. We didn't accomplish anything that day, but I didn't worry about the permit - Yemen is a country where bureaucracy is insignificant and all can be governed with talk and sufficient cups of tea. The next day we parted as friends, although I firmly turned away all invitations for breakfast, tea or coffee before we get to the bus station. On my way to Ibb tried several tactics to avoid traffic control points. I was rising my head as high as I could to get closer to the ceiling of the cab, so the military outside could only see my beard and lower part of my sun burned face. Usually they were not very thorough and I managed 3 inspections. They caught me at the fourth, but my permit was still valid. Arriving in Ibb I did not try to find any institutions but bought a ticket for a bus to Sana'a. I knew the soldiers hardly inspected the buses, or I could pretend to be asleep if they checked. Even if they caught me, I would pull out my permit, and even if they checked it - then would follow ... the inevitable cups of tea. In Ibb there is no much to see, but nearby is the beautiful village Djibla, which well deserves a whole day of attention. And then I traveled another 200 km and 3 checkpoints without any inspection. I arrived in Sana'a, it felt like coming home - quickly got to the hotel, steaming food and familiar faces of the dozens casual acquaintances.

It is not important how many days are you going to stay in Yemen, but how many times will you be there on Friday. Before flying back to the winter I went back to Dar al Hadjar - the former palace of the Imam 15 km from the capital. This most impressive fortress is situated on a piece of solid rock - 6 floors with a well, descending from the palace kitchen about 300 meters down through the rock. Dozens of weddings come from near and far, guests snapping pictures and crowding the rooms of the palace converted into a museum. The groom wears wreath on his head, men and women (entirely in black around the slit, only eyes showing) celebrate in different places. In the courtyard are seated couple of musicians with percussion instruments and their music is enough to accompany a Yemeni traditional dance (horo). Wedding guests gather for a line or semicircle dance with rapid feet movements with their curved knives out (Jambiya). Some hold crooks in the other hand, all dancers wear white skirts and formal jackets, and spectacle lasts for about 10 minutes. At the end of the dance, the two best dancers stand opposite each other - with their jambiyas in one hand and a turban wrapped around the palm in the other hand. Curved metal blades flash between the dancers, then they take turn to swing their knives at opponent's protected hand. Then both hide their knives behind their back and reach out with a friendly gesture - see, I'm unarmed. Friendship lasts only until the blades shine again over their heads and the drumming rhythm rises in a frenzy. There is no winner in this dance and watching from aside I wonder how many of my friends had holded curved knife behind their back... but this doesn't matter when you sit down with somebody - to break the bread and share the next cup.